








Enhancing Buyer Competitive Advantage: The Role of Supplier Flexibility in the FMCG Sector

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ABSTRACT

Background of the study: This research intends to evaluate the impacts of supplier flexibility on supplier performance and buyer competitive advantage, particularly in Pakistan's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. The current world has made buyer competitiveness a function of supplier performance, and this paper tries to identify factors such as information sharing, information quality, environmental uncertainties, and buyer-supplier relations. The study would be aimed at filling the gaps in the existing literature, especially about supplier flexibility and how it leads to improvement for both the supplier and the buyer.

Methodology: A causal research design was used in this study. Purposive sampling was utilised to collect data from 288 respondents who work in FMCG companies in Karachi, Pakistan. Responses were collected on a five-point Likert scale for providing numerical values. Cronbach's Alpha values were used for data analysis through Smart PLS, and the reliability of the data collected was ensured.

Results: Thus, the analysis indicates that the supplier's flexibility enhances supplier performance and contributes to competitive buyer advantage. It supports partial mediation. Thus, the commitment of both buyers and suppliers and the exchange of accurate information between them contribute to higher supplier performance and flexibility.

Conclusions: Environmental uncertainty is the primary driver of buyer competitive advantage. The study sets up supplier flexibility as a significant factor in developing competitive advantage in the FMCG industry and underlines the need for supplier development and relationship management. Firms should focus on these areas to improve market sensitivity and sustain competitive advantage.

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FMCG, supplier, flexibility, performance, competitive advantage, customer.

Introduction

Today, customer satisfaction is important for a business to survive in the fiercely competitive global market. Therefore, more and more manufacturing firms are becoming aware that supplier performance is becoming an important basis for competitive advantage for buyers (Anh, 2020). Even though there has been much research on the relationship between flexibility and competitive advantage, fewer studies look at how supplier flexibility increases buyer competitive advantage (Ghomi, 2021). Buyer satisfaction, supplier trust, relationship quality, and commitment depend on supplier flexibility. It becomes vital to be flexible during contract fulfilment because contracts do not

look out for all changes in the environmental conditions, especially when multiple transactions are considered (Lin Han, 2014).

With the fast-moving products and frequent turnover nature of products, manufacturing firms around the globe have widely adopted supplier flexibility in FMCG sectors.

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The FMCG industry has a significant target audience and sales volume, and its products are consumed daily worldwide. Customer relationship with the products has been emphasised previously (Khalid, 2021).

In today's businesses, technological advancements, shortened product lifecycles, and supply chain disruptions are some of them (Ustundag, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has added more uncertainty to businesses, and companies are now required to handle risks such as demand swings, equipment breakdown, and supply chain issues (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Using this, supplier flexibility has also become a crucial concern for keeping competitive. Therefore, it has become critical to maintain competitiveness through supplier flexibility. The importance of the buyer-supplier relationship to supplier performance was also highlighted in Lees et al. (2020). Despite this, little work has looked into the impact of information sharing, information quality, environmental uncertainty, and supplier relationship quality on supplier flexibility and its effect on performance, specifically in the FMCG sector. Mutual decision-making is dependent on effective communication and strong buyer-supplier relationships.

Mejooli (2022) proposes, based on Hassan Habib's research, that enhanced information sharing and buyer-supplier relationships can boost revenue growth. Mugarura (2010) also discovered strong correspondence between decision-making, incentive alignment, and information sharing in manufacturing sectors in Kampala. They aim to fill these research gaps by looking at the impact of supplier flexibility predictor and their impact on buyer competitiveness in the FMCG sector of Pakistan.

Research Objective

1. Factors influencing supplier's flexibility and its impact on supplier performance.
2. Impact of supplier flexibility on buyer competitive advantage in the Pakistani products and FMCG industries.
3. Whether a supplier's flexibility is related to Environmental Uncertainty, the relationship between buyers and suppliers. This kind of data shared between buyer and supplier is worthy enough.
4. Supplier performance is a mediator between supplier flexibility and competitive buyer edge.

Research Questions

1. What factors influence supplier flexibility, and how does this flexibility impact supplier performance in Pakistan's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry?
2. How does supplier flexibility affect buyer competitive advantage in the FMCG sector in Pakistan?
3. What is the relationship between supplier flexibility and environmental uncertainty, and how does this influence buyer-supplier interactions, particularly regarding data-sharing quality?
4. To what extent does supplier performance mediate the relationship between supplier flexibility and buyer competitive advantage in the FMCG industry?

The first observation is that there is a significant gap in the literature regarding supplier flexibility at the outset of this study. However, the literature has paid little attention to the role of

buyer competitive advantage in driving supplier flexibility and performance in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This study provides organisations with ways to help them augment their operational performance through better market adaptability in times of increased competition within the market. The study specifically addresses the following key issues:

1. Supplier relationships impact supplier flexibility as well as directly impact supplier performance.
2. The interconnectedness of these factors is also revealed in the influence of supplier performance on buyer competitive advantage.

In this paper, the investigation is to diagnose the impact of supplier flexibility on performance and buyer competitive advantage in the Pakistani FMCG industry. Key variables are information sharing, information quality, environmental uncertainties, and supplier relationships. We contribute to supplier performance literature by extending how supplier flexibility facilitates buyer competitive advantage and study the relationship between buyer-supplier relationships and supplier performance.

Literature Review

New technologies and globalisation, political instabilities and changing social patterns, new competition and changing customer needs have raised uncertainty in the supply network and thus have required more adaptable supply networks. In the past, firms have aimed at lean and speedy supply chains for stable settings, but such systems fail to react to changes in demand (Harsasi, 2017). This study addresses gaps in previous research by applying three key theoretical frameworks: These theories: Channel coordination theory, the theory of constraints and Dynamic capabilities theory. The need for information sharing is the key tenet of the channel coordination theory aimed at improving an organisation's performance and the relationship between buyers and suppliers. Derived from the system constraints, the theory of constraints seeks out constraints that lower performance, especially when dealing with environmental issues (Orue, 2021). According to Nayal et al., dynamic capabilities theory depicts the capacity of an organisation to reconstitute the business processes to continue to generate value (2021).

Supply chain agility is important, especially in the global environment, because markets are constantly changing, and it is important to adjust to the change in demand, as observed in the FMCG industry. Supplier flexibility, which is the capacity of a supplier to adapt to changes in volume, delivery, or product changes, positively affects the supplier and buyer relationship and overall performance (Ustundag, 2020). Talking about the FMCG sector in Pakistan, it is imperative to mention that profit margins are relatively low, which is why flexibility is the key to success in the face of numerous ongoing changes (Siddiqui, 2019).

Theoretical development of hypotheses

The study explores how information sharing, information quality, and environmental uncertainty impact supplier flexibility and buyer competitive advantage. Information sharing improves supplier-manufacturer relationships and supply chain effectiveness. While there have been numerous studies on its performance effects, its effect on supplier flexibility, particularly in dynamic industries such as automotive, is still under-researched (Kim, 2017; Nidal, 2016; Schroeder & Flynn, 2002; Huo, 2020).

H1: Information sharing has positive influences on supplier flexibility.

The second hypothesis in this area suggests that the availability of high-quality information leads to increased supplier flexibility. Fawcett, 2007; and Zailani, 2018, have it that effective forecasting, inventory management and logistics coordination require accurate, clear and relevant data. High-quality information prevents distortions of meaning and enhances bonds between supply chain members, allowing suppliers to satisfy buyer requirements on time and enhance the total adaptability within the supply chain in the presence of volatilities (Putra, 2020).

H2: Information quality positively influences supplier flexibility.

Environmental uncertainty encompasses internal and external variables affecting organisational goals, creating ambiguity and complexity (Williams & Clampitt, 2017). Studies highlight its significant impact on supply chain performance, necessitating flexibility to address high uncertainty (Shukor, 2020). Flexibility enhances logistical efficiency and supply chain performance (Nagarajan, 2013). Technological advancements and market uncertainty drive environmental uncertainty, especially in technology-dependent firms (Lee et al., 2009). Flexible strategies help reduce risks and achieve goals (Luo et al., 2016). Resource dependence theory suggests that supply chain uncertainties positively impact strategic SCM, where firms can utilise their resources to gain an advantage over others (Paulraj et al., 2007).

H3: Environmental uncertainty positively influences supplier flexibility.

The procurement model focuses on long-term buyer-supplier relationships, with an interest in the shared objectives of quality control in competitive markets. Firms with close relationships share more risks, rewards, and effort in troubleshooting (Anh, 2020). Growing global competition has also highlighted the benefits of outsourcing weaknesses with dynamic supplier relationship management. Suppliers can overcome the pliers and collaboration challenges (Bai, 2021). The key to operational performance and competitiveness lies in the buyer-supplier relationships (Forkmann, 2016).

H4: Buyer-supplier relationships positively influence supplier flexibility.

Supplier performance is associated with supplier relationships, determined by quality, cost, and speed of delivery. Good buyer-supplier relationships promote performance, efficiency, and flexibility in competitive settings. Supply chain integration impacts organisations' operational and business performance (Tarigan, 2020). Supplier relationship management facilitates communication, cooperation, and trust, leading to operational capabilities, market share, and profitability. Strong supplier relationships open access to resources and leverage competencies for competitive advantage (Zhang & Cao, 2018). Alliances with suppliers enhance firms' responsiveness to uncertainty and improve performance (Gyampah et al., 2019).

H5: Supplier performance is positively influenced by buyer-supplier relationships.

The factors that measure the supplier performance include quality, delivery time and cost, price, services, adaptability and relationship. Enhancements in these areas are necessary for initiatives in supplier development (Tungjitjarum, 2012). The link between supplier flexibility and organisational performance has been investigated through direct and mediated models, Considering the financial and non-financial consequences (Mishra 2020). Supplier flexibility encompasses volume, product mix, and new product introduction, which is critical for industries like FMCG. Managers commit resources to cut lead times, adopt JIT, and increase investment in R&D and labour flexibility to increase operational competencies and performance (Gyampah et al., 2019).

H6: Supplier flexibility positively affects supplier performance.

Competitive advantage is the strategies that enable a business to gain superiority over rivals by differentiation of price, cost efficiency, delivery, and flexibility (Gul Gilal, 2016). Performance evaluation enables a firm to compare itself with its industry and period and make strategic decisions (Westhuizen et al., 2020). Benefits of performance evaluation include analysis of past and current results, benchmarking, and decision support (Crowther, 2011). Systematic performance measurement boosts productivity, profitability, and competitiveness, promoting long-term growth (Allen, 2013; Westhuizen et al., 2020).

Supplier flexibility increases market learning, where firms can react to changes in the market other than through price or quality adjustments (Yang, 2019). Flexibility promotes market experimentation, hypothesis testing, and innovative solutions, developing marketing competencies and adaptive strategies (Yang, 2019). Competitive advantage results from capabilities such as flexibility, reliability, quality, cost management, and pricing, which improve the resilience of firms against competitors (Latunreng, 2019).

H7: Supplier flexibility positively affects buyer competitive advantage.

H8: Supplier performance positively affects buyer competitive advantage.

Supplier management aims to increase competitive advantage through quality, cost, delivery, and flexibility as key capabilities (Li et al., 2006). Marketplace edge is driven by product cost, delivery reliability, quality, time to market, and innovation. New competitive opportunities also involve environmental concerns that enhance core processes (Zhu & Geng, 2001)—competitive advantage results from creating perceived value. More excellent customer value increases market positions and sales (Li, 2012).

Cost reductions, lead time reduction, quality and productivity enhancement, and even lower costs all benefit from good buyer-supplier relationships. Collaboration for performance improvement through supplier development is essential to competitiveness (Li, 2012). There are two competitive advantages: cost leadership and differentiation. Cost leadership seeks low prices for price-sensitive customers, while differentiation is a unique offering that may involve high-quality products, broad product lines, exceptional service, and efficient distribution (Brenes et al., 2014).

Methodology

The study used a deductive approach whereby specific propositions in their context were tested and verified to permit the assessment of theories that align with the research goals. A causal research design was adopted, utilising correlation to explore variables such as information sharing, information quality, environmental uncertainty, and supplier relations, thus examining their relationship comprehensively.

The aim was to have purposeful sampling focused on specific departments, such as the supply chain and procurement, by contacting the executives, managers, and departmental heads. The cross-sectional sample ensured more authenticity in the collected data. Questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale were sent to 288 employees working with Karachi-based FMCG organisations like Nestle, Unilever, and Engro Foods. A discussion was held with the industry people before finalising the structure of the questionnaire. PLS software was used for data analysis, wherein PLS-SEM hypotheses test and

convergent and discriminant validity were examined. All study ethical considerations applied, such as clear disclosure, participants' understanding, and anonymity about the data throughout the study process.

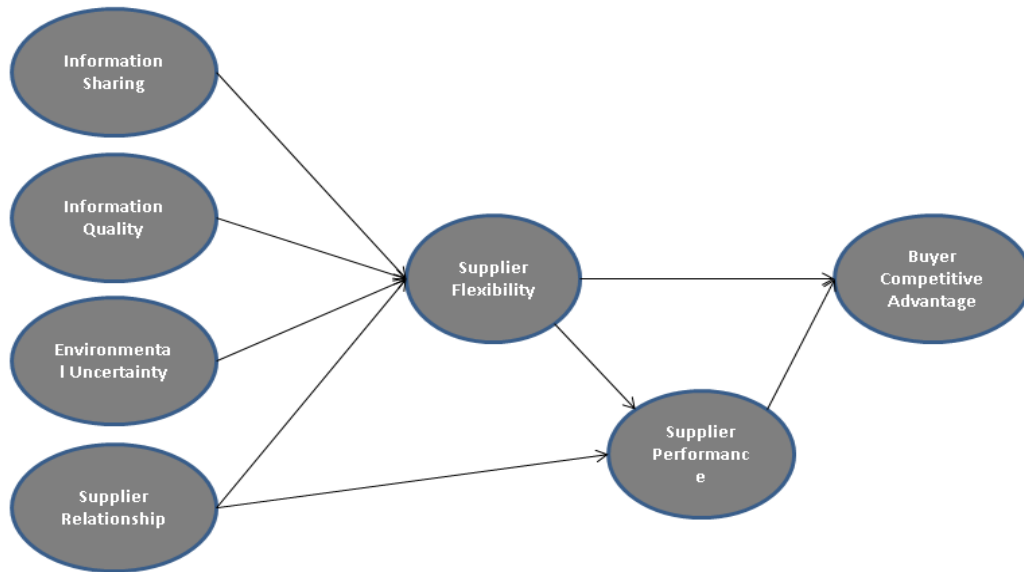


Figure 01: Theoretical Framework

Result and Analysis

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	219	76.04%
	Female	69	23.96%
	Total	288	100%
Occupation	Student	10	3.47%
	Employee	182	63.19%
	Head of the department	12	4.17%
	Manager	50	17.36%
	In-charge/Officers	34	11.81%
	Total	288	100%
Sectors	Textile industry	30	10.42%
	Food industry	158	54.86%
	Chemical industry	16	5.56%
	Service provider industry	33	11.46%
	Footwear Manufacture Industry	10	3.47%
	Pharmaceutical industry	1	0.35%
	Machine and Equipment Manufacturing	10	3.47%
	Retail Industry	1	0.35%
	Other Consumer Goods industry	29	10.07%
		Total	288

Table 01: Respondent profile

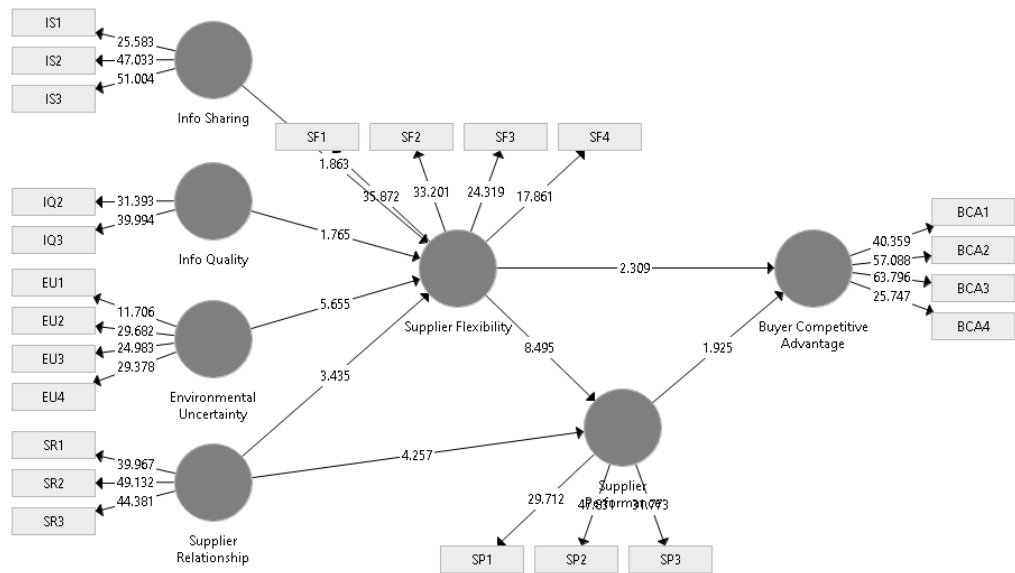


Figure 02: Measurement modelling

In Table 01, the profile of respondents is made clear. Of the total population respondents, 288, the data was collected from 219 Males out of 288, while only 69 were females. Male respondents only accounted for 76.04 per cent; hence, males dominated this research study. The possibility of the occupation was also evaluated, and most respondents are employees on different levels. Moreover, out of these 288 respondents, 182 are Employees, about 63.19% of the total respondents). Fifty respondents are managers, and thirty-four are in charge /officer level; their ratios were 17.36 per cent and 11.81 per cent, respectively. Out of the respondents, only 10 were students. If elaborated, then it is found that 158 of the respondents were from the food industry, and this figure was more than half of the total respondents, that is, out of 288, and the ratio was 54.86 per cent. In the second position, textile recruited 30 respondents, and from the service provider industry, 33 candidates were selected, equal to 10.42% and 11.46% respectively. The consumer goods industry also has 29 respondents, which accounts for 10.07 per cent of the total. The rest of the respondents are from the chemical/footwear/Pharma and Machine manufacturing industry, with a total ratio of 13.19%.

	BCA	EU	IQ	IS	SF	SP	SR
BCA1	0.866						
BCA2	0.907						
BCA3	0.919						
BCA4	0.889						
EU1		0.741					
EU2		0.846					
EU3		0.824					
EU4		0.803					
IQ2			0.870				
IQ3			0.884				
IS1				0.853			
IS2				0.892			
IS3				0.886			
SF1					0.837		
SF2					0.836		
SF3					0.810		
SF4					0.772		
SP1						0.855	
SP2						0.902	
SP3						0.865	
SR1							0.870
SR2							0.892
SR3							0.891

Table 02: Outer Loading's (BCA: Buyer Competitive Advantage, EU: Environmental Uncertainty, IQ: Info Quality, IS: Info Sharing, SF: Supplier Flexibility, SP: Supplier Performance, SR: Supplier Relationship)

According to Table 02, outer loading denotes the position of the latent variable with its construct, which represents the model, and summative data of outer loadings, which depicts the reliability of all the latent variables in the study (Hair, 2017). According to the data, all the scales of items of outer loading are higher than 0.7 (70%), which indicates that the data is reliable, and they establish that all the items loading absolute contribution belong to their assigned construct. Nevertheless, there were a few problems with the items IQ1 and SP4 that were deleted to address the problems with outer loadings.

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Buyer Competitive Advantage	0.918	0.942	0.802
Environmental Uncertainty	0.818	0.880	0.647
Info Quality_	0.700	0.869	0.769
Info Sharing	0.851	0.909	0.770
Supplier Flexibility	0.830	0.887	0.663
Supplier Performance	0.846	0.907	0.764
Supplier Relationship	0.860	0.915	0.782

Table 03: Construct Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's Alpha measured internal consistency, which is how a group of items are closely related. Table 03 shows that Cronbach's Alpha is more incredible than 0.60 (60%), which measures the reliability based on the interrelationship of the latent variables (Hamid, 2017). Moreover, the reliability analysis by using Composite reliability also assessed the internal consistency of a scale of items that were

the same in alpha value as presented in the above table, and it also depicted that the measurement values of composite reliability are more than 0.60 which show that, the scale of items have uniformity. The average Variance Extracted (AVE) expresses how many Items of a particular Latent Variable can be explained. The AVE of the items was measured with seven items, and it was found that the AVE of these items was more significant than 0.50 (50%), so all scales of items were well measured.

Discriminant Validity measures or estimates the true co-relationship between the constructs (Ronkko, 2022). We used two significant standards to check discriminant validity: the Fornell & Larcker and the HTMT Criterion.

	Buyer Competitive Advantage	Environmental Uncertainty	Info Quality	Info Sharing	Supplier Flexibility	Supplier Performance
Buyer Competitive Advantage						
Environmental Uncertainty	0.553					
Info Quality	0.548	0.980				
Info Sharing	0.522	0.792	0.942			
Supplier Flexibility	0.532	0.984	0.820	0.732		
Supplier Performance	0.509	0.881	0.816	0.680	0.903	
Supplier Relationship	0.473	0.875	0.982	0.766	0.845	0.804

Table 04: HTMT Criterion

The method to examine discriminant validity is the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations, introduced by Henseler in 2015 (Roeme, 2021), to check the correlation between latent variables. The HTMT criterion is also used to evaluate discriminant validity; it provides two advantages over Fornell-Larcker: it does not require a factor analysis and calculation of construct scores (Afthanorhan, 2021). In Table 5, values less than 0.90 indicate that the discriminant validity by HTMT criterion has been established and shows a co-relationship between latent variables. Some values in the above table are higher than 0.90, which indicates that they are not correlated to the latent variable.

	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	p-alues	Remarks
Environmental Uncertainty -> Supplier Flexibility	5.524	0.000	Significant
Info quality -> Supplier Flexibility	1.763	0.079	Insignificant
Info Sharing -> Supplier Flexibility	1.921	0.055	Insignificant
Supplier Flexibility -> Buyer Competitive Advantage	2.315	0.021	Significant
Supplier Flexibility -> Supplier Performance	7.993	0.000	Significant
Supplier Performance -> Buyer Competitive Advantage	2.054	0.040	Significant
Supplier Relationship -> Supplier Flexibility	3.344	0.001	Significant
Supplier Relationship -> Supplier Performance	3.999	0.000	Significant

Table 05: Hypotheses testing

Path Coefficients are the final stage of this analysis, which points out the centrophraph directional effect given to a variable that is accepted as an effect on other variables. As presented in Table 05, we have safeguarded the assumed hypotheses in the research study. The null hypotheses have been supported by testing for their corresponding P-values with an arbitrarily given value of less than or equal to 0.05. The results have shown that environmental uncertainty hurts Supplier Flexibility since the P-value is less than the threshold value of 0.000. Similarly, the present study establishes supplier flexibility as having a positive and significant influence on buyer-buyer competitive advantage since the obtained P-value is

0.021, below the 0.05 threshold. Also, for Supplier flexibility,' there is an observed relationship with supplier performance because the P-value, i.e. 0.000, supports it. Secondly, the supplier's performance affects the buyer's competitive advantage, which has been shown to moderate the relationship between supplier flexibility and buyer competitive advantage. The P-value of 0.001 also supports the relationship. Therefore, the mediation effect is supported. Also, supplier relationships affect supplier flexibility and performance as indicated by their P-Values, which are 0.001 and 0.000, respectively. Nevertheless, the research did not find a relationship between quality of information and supplier flexibility or information sharing and supplier flexibility since the P-values were more significant than the threshold value.

Discussion

Our research indicates that environmental uncertainty plays a significant role in shaping supplier flexibility, a finding that aligns with previous studies linking buyer demand to environmental volatility (Luo et al., 2016). This relationship highlights the importance of adaptability in supply chains, especially in rapidly changing markets. In this context, our study underscores the crucial connection between supplier flexibility and buyer competitive advantage, affirming that greater supplier flexibility directly enhances organisational competitiveness (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This result mirrors the findings of Mishra (2020), who demonstrated that supplier flexibility positively influences supplier performance. Additionally, research by Westhuizen and colleagues supports this perspective, showing that improvements in supplier performance are closely tied to enhanced buyer competitive advantage. Such findings suggest that firms that focus on improving supplier performance will likely see substantial productivity and profitability increases.

Moreover, our study highlights the strong positive relationship between supplier flexibility and supplier relationships and between supplier relationships and supplier performance. While limited research has explored how supplier performance impacts buyer competitive advantage, our findings add to the literature by confirming this positive correlation, which is vital for firms seeking to sustain a competitive advantage (Li, 2012). Nonetheless, contrary to the conclusions of Ustundag (2020), we did not identify a significant positive or negative correlation between information quality and supplier flexibility, supplier performance, or the relationship between information quality and supplier flexibility. This discrepancy suggests that the effects of information quality on these variables may not be as pronounced as previously thought in specific contexts.

In addition, our research diverges from Nidal's (2016) findings, which reported a positive correlation between information sharing and supplier flexibility and performance. In contrast, our results did not reveal such relationships, particularly in Pakistan's FMCG sector. The study indicates sector-specific dynamics that require further investigation to understand how these variables interact in different contexts. These findings highlight the need for more research to explore the underlying mechanisms driving these results, especially in emerging markets where supply chain conditions might differ significantly from established sectors.

Conclusion and Future Recommendation

This study presents the factors affecting supplier flexibility, its effect on supplier performance, and its contribution to buyer competitive advantage. Also observed was how supplier performance affected buyer competitive advantage. Data from 288 Fast-moving consumer goods sectors of Pakistan was collected. Moreover, this research proves that supplier flexibility affects supplier performance and

positively affects the buyer competitive advantage of Pakistani FMCG sectors. Moreover, this study confirms that supplier relationships positively correlated with supplier performance. In this research, we develop a model explaining how supplier flexibility and performance will give buyers a competitive advantage. We refine the original model through analysis of the path coefficients.

This study's result must be added to the supply chain literature. This study provides the most important contribution: past studies have not discussed the relationship between supplier performance and buyer competitive advantage. Further, this study also fills the gap, and the relationship between supplier relationship and supplier performance is also proven. The superior performance is a result of supplier flexibility. In this research, we found a strong relationship between supplier flexibility and buyer competitive advantage, which has important implications for organisations regarding changes in demand and competition with competitors. Our study findings also have some positive implications for the implementation in the managerial context. Nowadays, the competition is very high, and customer demand changes rapidly, so buyer and supplier firm managers must concentrate on organisational competitiveness to improve performance. These days, they focus on improving supplier performance by improving supplier firm managers' relationships.

The study has been done based on some issues about which Karachi's data was collected, and further research can collect data from other cities of Pakistan like Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, etc. In addition, this study will be further researched with other sectors of Pakistan. Nowadays, consumer demands have changed unconditionally and repeatedly, so one more thing needs to be added. Hence, in this situation, how can any organisation compete with the other companies if there is repeated competition and uncertain market competition is at its peak? So, if we can analyse the FMCG sector's standing in this research, which is very feasible for the FMCG sector to take a stable position with such uncertain changes, then this is good enough for the FMCG sector to put them into a routine.

Author's Contribution

Conception or Design: Syed Muhammad Fauzan Ali, Aleem Shah

Data Collection and processing, Analysis or Interpretation of Data: Maham and Rawal, Iqra and Mariya

Manuscript Writing & Approval: Syed Fauzan Ali and Aleem Shah

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